

Remarks and an Exchange With Reporters on Immigration Policy July 27, 1993

The President. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. I'd like to say a special word of thanks to the large number of Members of Congress who are here today. I think I have the entire list. If I don't, the Vice President will amend it when I finish. But I see Senator Kennedy, Senator Simon, Senator Feinstein, Senator Boxer, Senator Graham and Congressmen Brooks, Mazzoli, Schumer, Bryant, Fish, Kennedy, Lantos and Gilman. I think that's every Member of Congress here. Did I miss anyone? I missed Congressman Gallegly; I'm sorry.

Several weeks ago, I asked the Vice President to work with our Departments and Agencies to examine what more might be done about the problems along our borders. I was especially concerned about the growing problems of alien smuggling and international terrorists hiding behind immigrant status, as well as the continuing flow of illegal immigrants across American borders.

Following several weeks of intense efforts, including his personal involvement in resolving the recent alien smuggling incident with Mexico, the Vice President presented me with a report spelling out what we might do. I have reviewed that report and approved it. We have spoken to Members of Congress, including those who are here today and others. I want to particularly acknowledge Senator Kennedy, Senator Simpson, Congressmen Brooks and Mazzoli for all their work on this issue over many, many years. We're also in debt to Senators Feinstein and Boxer for their aggressive work in trying to deal with the growing problem, especially in the State of California, and I want to state publicly how much I appreciate the work the Hispanic Caucus has done to ensure that a balanced approach is adopted in dealing with this issue.

The simple fact is that we must not, and we will not, surrender our borders to those who wish to exploit our history of compassion and justice. We cannot tolerate those who traffic in human cargo, nor can we allow our people to be endangered by those who would enter our country to terrorize Americans. But the solution to the problem of illegal immigration is not simply to close our borders. The solution is to wel-

come legal immigrants and legal legitimate refugees and to turn away those who do not obey the laws. We must say no to illegal immigration so we can continue to say yes to legal immigration.

Today we send a strong and clear message. We will make it tougher for illegal aliens to get into our country. We will treat organizing a crime syndicate to smuggle aliens as a serious crime. And we will increase the number of border patrol, equipping and training them to be first class law enforcement officers. These initiatives for which I am asking the Congress for an additional \$172.5 million in 1994 are an important step in regaining control over our borders and respect for our laws. When I made a commitment to combat this problem on June 18th, I announced a plan of action. This is the next step in fulfilling that commitment.

Some will worry that our action today sends the wrong message, that this means we are against all immigration. That is akin to America closing its doors. But nothing could be further from the truth. Let me be clear: Our nation has always been a safe haven for refugees and always been the world's greatest melting pot. What we announce today will not make it tougher for the immigrant who comes to this country legally, lives by our laws, gets a job, and pursues the American dream. This administration will promote family unification. We will reach out to those who have the skills we need to make our nation stronger, and we will welcome new citizens to our national family with honor and with dignity. But to treat terrorists and smugglers as immigrants dishonors the tradition of the immigrants who have made our nation great. And it unfairly taints the millions of immigrants who live here honorably and are a vital part of every segment of our society. Today's initiatives are about stopping crime, toughening the penalties for the criminals, and giving our law enforcement people the tools they need to do their job.

I'm also taking steps today to address the long-term challenges of reforming our immigration policy. I intend to appoint a new chair to the congressionally mandated Commission on Immigration Reform and to ask the Congress

to expand the Commission to include senior administration officials. I'm also asking our Attorney General, Janet Reno, and the INS Commissioner-Designate, Doris Meissner, to make sure the INS is as professional and effectively managed as it can be. Under their leadership, I have no doubt that it will be. With these efforts, I hope that we can begin a broad-based national discussion on this important issue and move toward significant resolution of the problems that plague all Americans.

Now, I'd like to ask the Vice President to come forward with my thanks for his outstanding work to discuss the specifics of the initiative.

[At this point, the Vice President outlined the immigration policy. The Attorney General then discussed what enforcement measures would be taken.]

Q. With all due respect, sir, all of this has been tried previously. The Simpson, Romano, Mazzoli bill did make a similar attempt to this by increasing penalties, they increased funding, they increased border patrols, they increased penalties to employers, and yet, nothing happened. What leads you to believe that this time something might really happen?

The President. I want to give them a chance to answer this. It's not true that all these things have been tried before. First, Senator D'Amato, I'm glad to see you. Thank you for coming.

It's not true that all these things have been tried before, and it's certainly plain to anybody with eyes to see that the border patrol is drastically understaffed, breathtakingly understaffed. But there are also some new elements in this, and I think I'd let the Vice President and the Attorney General address them.

The Vice President. Yes, the change in the exclusion provisions is brand new. The change in the investment in the information systems that will avoid a repetition of what happened when the sheik applied for a visa and then the office didn't have the information because even though the State Department did, it didn't have the information system to display it, a lot of these things are brand new. They've never been done before, and it is a coordinated approach involving all of the players involved and the full keyboard, if you will. Every part of the issue is being addressed here.

Now, there are some things that are not addressed and the procedure the President outlined for addressing the longer term problems

is going to work just as well as this procedure worked. It's going to take more time, though.

Q. How much of this counterterrorism provision was sparked by the World Trade Center bombing, and how confident are you that the borders will be safe now from terrorists getting into the United States, if this proposed legislation is enacted?

The President. I can answer the first part; maybe I should invite the Attorney General to comment on the second. There's no question that the World Trade Center bombing has caused us to review a whole range of issues, not just involving immigration, in terms of our ability to deal with the whole threat of actual or potential terrorism. And when that happened, we began in earnest to review not only this issue but the capacity of our law enforcement agencies to deal with it, and we will continue to do that. I think that I owe that to the American people, and that clearly had something to do with it.

Attorney General Reno. With respect to the second part, no one can ensure anything, except that we are going to try our best. When I came into office, I found a service that too often did not communicate with law enforcement and vice-versa, that too often was not in communication with other Federal Agencies. I think it's imperative that we bring everyone together to communicate to do everything that we can to address the critical issue of terrorism and to be as vigilant as possible. To ensure our borders at this day and time is a very difficult task, but it is one that is of the highest priority of this administration.

Q. Mr. President, on the question of the reason illegal Chinese immigrants—obviously, they involve three parties: the United States, China, and Taiwan, because some of the ships are from Taiwan. So I wonder, are you planning to personally discuss with leaders of China and Taiwan, maybe, in November APEC meeting in Seattle?

The President. Well, let me say, first of all, I just talked to the Secretary of State last night, and he raised these issues personally in his conversation with the representative of the Chinese Government recently. And we have enjoyed good relations with Taiwan, also. We intend to raise it with them. We intend to raise it at the highest levels with both countries and to seek their active and consistent cooperation. And I think, as you point out, without that coopera-

tion, we will continue to have greater difficulties on this end. But I think they will help us more, and I have no reason to believe that they won't. We're just going to have to work on it. We're going to have to have their help to do better.

Q. Are you inviting them to the APEC meeting? Are you inviting President Li Teng-hui to the APEC meeting?

The President. We also are discussing how we're going to deal with the APEC meeting, who is going to come from all the 15 countries. And of course, who comes will be in part, I think, determined by how much we'll want to pursue this discussion there. But in terms of who will be there, that hasn't been finalized from their point of view.

Go ahead.

Q. Mr. President, how do you depoliticize the asylum process? Because in the Reagan years, anybody from El Salvador was not considered to have a bona fide claim of asylum. In the Bush years, Chinese fleeing birth control policies were deemed to have a good claim for asylum. How do you make this more rational so that the American people and the foreigners both know what qualifies as asylum?

The President. That's a very good question. I'm so glad you asked it. I think the answer is that we have to have criteria for enforcing this law that grows out of our laws that are based on policies rooted in laws enacted by the Congress. I think that is the answer. Obviously, if Congress and the administration work with the Congress, if we decide that there's some policy that's so important for other reasons, for our other foreign policy concerns, our human rights concerns, you name it, that we want to root that in our legal policy, then no one can accuse us of being arbitrary, because we will have gone through a deliberative process. The Congress will have made a judgment; we will all be on public record.

But I do think it's very important that immigrants from the world looking at us and governments from the world looking at us, not believe that the President will wake up someday and decide that for some arbitrary reason we will enforce the immigration laws of the country in

one way or another. Perhaps the Vice President and the Attorney General would like to make a comment about that, also.

The Vice President. I'd like to add one brief point. This proposal does take the partisanship and the politics out of it. This is a bipartisan initiative. Republicans as well as Democrats are here from both the Senate and the House. And if I could summarize the basic tone of this initiative, I would use the words of Doris Meissner, who is the designee to head up INS, when she said not long ago, we want to stop illegal immigration so that we can continue opening our country to legal immigration. The two go together, and that's what this proposal is designed to do.

The President. I think we've answered about all the questions we can. I'd like to close by reemphasizing that point. When I ran for President, I think in some ways the most rewarding part of the experience was having the opportunity to see just how many different countries and how many different ethnic groups have contributed to making America what it is today. We don't want to do anything to interrupt that. But we cannot continue to progress as a country unless we have a more vigorous response to this problem, and we don't want to cloud the two. This has nothing to do with our support for keeping the rainbow and the melting pot of America going and growing and enriching and strengthening this country.

But the kinds of practices that are manifest in who can get into this country on an airplane, what kind of illegal smuggling can go on, and the fact that our borders leak like a sieve, those things cannot be permitted to continue in good conscience. It's not good for the American immigrants who are here legally in this country, for the American economy, for the cohesion of our society, or for the rule of law worldwide. And we're going to try to do better. This is a very good first step.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:38 a.m. in Room 450 of the Old Executive Office Building.